

Biting on the Bullet

John Haylett, The Morning Star, London, 20 February 1993

Anyone suggesting in the 1980s that, by August 1991, the South African Communist Party would be legal and its Soviet counterpart illegal would have been seen as a suitable case for treatment.

But it happened – and it meant that the newly legalised SACP and its African National Congress allies have had to operate in an International and domestic situation far different from that envisaged during their struggle against the apartheid regime.

Communist leader Chris Hani, who is also a national executive committee member of the ANC, is in no doubt that the movement has a lot to learn.

"Our approach must be to create a popular democracy – an accountable socialist society," he stresses.

"We must look at our history critically and remove the blinkers that we all wore. We mustn't feel that it is disloyal to criticise.

"We made the mistake of accepting the Soviet Union as a model in all circumstances. If communists in the Soviet Union had dared to criticise, I believe that socialism there would still be alive and kicking today," he insists.

"We have broad agreement within the ANC because of the organisation's democratic open style.

"Democracy for us is not democracy for the elites. The ANC negotiating commission will report back to a working committee, which will consult with the SACP and COSATU and will then call in regional leaders to discuss the issues.

"It means that there are sharp discussions, even heated debate, but we manage to bring everyone along," he explains.



THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN: The South African Communist Party has emerged from its period of illegality (above) to flourish despite the demise of the Soviet Union.

Another lesson, which Hani believes is necessary to take in the light of the Soviet experience, is the need for a flexible approach to the economy.

While remaining firm on the need for a future ANC government to negotiate an economic reconstruction package with the party and the trade unions – to deal with poverty, jobs provision, health and education – he believes that widespread nationalisation is not feasible.

"Communists and socialists are now beginning to realise that nationalisation is not necessarily the answer to all problems of economic development," he asserts.

Nationalisation of certain areas of the public utilities will be needed to facilitate electrification, bring clean water to all South Africans and make sure that public transport is accessible to workers and poor people.

In addition, the government would take a stake in industries like mining to enable its voice to be heard and to affect economic policy.

"An ANC government's supporters would lack the skills to run industries but this does not mean we could be held to ransom.

"Everything in the country must reflect the reality that we are doing away with the political and economic domination of the majority by the minority."

To this end, Chris Hani proposes that programmes should be set up to assist black people in acquiring management, marketing and other economic skills.

He also calls for an enhanced role for the trade union movement.

"The trade unions must be the watchdog at the workplace. Why should we not be pushing for decision making at the plant by workers, who are totally involved in the work of the plant?" he asks.

This control function for the union would, he believes, militate against the kind of statist failing, common both to the British Labour and Soviet communist approaches to public ownership.

Transcribed from a facsimile. The original article (first part, page 6) looks like this:

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Second part (page 7):

*South African Communist Party leader **Chris Hani** tells John Haylett about his hopes for an end to apartheid and how he sees the country's transition to democracy.*

Despite his criticism of the Soviet experiment, Hani believes that it is necessary to keep a sense of balance and not to dismiss its very real achievements.

"Didn't the Soviet Union create a situation where the oppressed countries for the first time had a shield to defend themselves against the forces of imperialism and colonialism?

"Didn't the Soviet Union assist virtually all the revolutionary struggles in the world?

"Didn't they help to boost the morale of all working class parties in their struggles?

"Didn't they solve the problems of illiteracy and provide services to people which Yeltsin has now withdrawn?" he asks.

"Nevertheless, the abuses, distortions, bureaucracy and abuse of human rights must be attacked openly, so that never again will we commit those things in the name of socialism," he declares.

In this connection, he is optimistic about the socialist system in Cuba, from which he returned with an SACP delegation last weekend.

Accepting that the system is far from perfect, he says that Cuba has solved basic problems of education and health provision that no other Latin American country has solved – despite being subjected to a US economic blockade for over 30 years.

He believes that the Cuban leadership is closer to the people than its Soviet counterparts had been, that it encourages criticism and that there is no yawning life-style gap between people and leadership.

"A solidarity campaign with Cuba is now the key solidarity campaign for all progressives. The world should build up solidarity with Cuba, as we did with Vietnam," he recommends.

Turning to the ticklish questions of negotiations with the de Klerk regime and of sharing power with the National Party in a government of national unity, the communist leader says that he has "no problem" with power-sharing.

"How long will power-Sharing last? The National Party wants five years or more. We want to shorten the pain of being with the NP in government.

"It's an albatross round our necks. We want, at the right time, to drop it," he stresses.

However, he is aware of the contradictory feelings besetting white South Africans – wanting change but fearing what it may bring.

"We want this transition to be as painless as possible.

"We have seen that, in the white group, there are elements that are unhappy with developments, unhappy with the dismantling of apartheid – some are in the Civil Service, some in the security forces

"The question is: how to prevent a rebellion to stop democracy from being fulfilled? That's why we need a limited period of a government of national unity," he explains.

There are still many question marks against the motives of apartheid President FW de Klerk, who has still done little against those of his erstwhile supporters, who have stoked up violence – either directly against ANC supporters or indiscriminately to heighten social psychosis.

The state president could have questioned former British National Front member Bruce Anderson – and until his deportation a leader of Inkatha – about who was helping him to smuggle arms to the organisation.

The president didn't do so, contenting himself with expelling Anderson from the country, but then made a great song and dance about three ANC members caught bringing weapons into Natal, the Inkatha warlords' killing fields.

Although the government had four days to raise this question with the ANC, it waited until the morning of a bilateral meeting to blow it up into a major row, possibly seeking to engineer a split between the ANC and its south Natal leadership, especially veteran communist Harry Gwala.

Gwala has organised self-defence squads against the Inkatha gangs and remarked enigmatically that "when they come for us, we won't welcome them with bibles."

Chris Hani recalls that in the late '80s, Inkatha launched a reign of terror in the townships around Pietermaritzburg to wipe out ANC cadres.

"Gwala comes from a region which has suffered a lot of violence. His top lieutenants have been gunned down and eliminated.

South African Communist Party leader **Chris Hani** tells John Haylett about his hopes for an end to apartheid and how he sees the country's transition to democracy

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"Gwala comes from a region which has suffered a lot of violence. His top lieutenants have been gunned down and eliminated."

"He lives in a situation teeming with warlords, violence and murder. A leader of his stature sees it as his responsibility to provide a measure of protection to his constituency."

"Anyone who judges Gwala must judge him as a person in this situation. Gwala wants peace — he doesn't want surrender."

"There is a dialectical connection between the struggle for peace and self-defence," Hani insists, pointing out that the development of self-defence units was a way of combating the death squads, "without violating our agreements with this regime, in terms of suspending our military operations."

He identifies an element of hypocrisy in the government, since it says nothing about heavily armed neighbourhood watches in white areas to defend these rich communities against criminals, while denying black townships the right to defend themselves against attack.

"I doubt that the ANC would have any organisation in some areas of Natal, if the comrades had not gone out to acquire skills, get weapons, and defend themselves and the people," he declares.

The ongoing violence is, he believes, a reason for wasting no time in bringing forward democratic elections, since accepting the opposite argument would encourage those elements against a settlement to foment bloodshed.

The ANC has shown itself willing to compromise. It is in favour of a government of national unity, but insists on real progress toward democracy.

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With thanks to John Haylett

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For this and more material on Chris Hani go to:

<http://studycircle.wikispaces.com/6+CU+Chris+Hani+Archive>